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"Oscar Wilde," *The Montreal Daily Star* (Montreal, QC), 15 May 1882, 3

### *THE ARCH-AESTHETE ON AESTHETICISM*

#### How the Movement Progresses in England—The Use of Fashion.

Mr. Oscar Wilde arrived at the Windsor Hotel yesterday, where he very kindly received our reporter this morning. He was found amid the ruins of a substantial looking breakfast, and there was nothing in his appearance to indicate that he had been sitting up all night with a lily, unless, indeed, the fact of his breakfasting late might suggest something of the sort; but then again, the fact of his breakfasting at all refutes such a supposition. Some of Mr. Wilde's critics in addition to caricaturing his principles, have gone so far as to accuse him of affectation to an offensive degree, and as these statements have found their way into print, it is but the merest justice on the part of our representative to say that if affectation exists there, it is most artfully concealed and therefore can scarcely be offensive. To the tap of the Ethiopian lily who announced our representative, a remarkably musical voice replied, "Come in," and as the door opened a tall, well built gentleman with a very pleasing countenance arose from the breakfast table and advanced with extended hand and a smile of welcome to receive his early visitor. He was dressed in a delicate sage-green velvet coat and light cloth continuations of the Philistine order of architecture. A red necktie blended well with his dark complexion, which was thrown into striking relief by a profusion of long black hair surrounding it. The costume was decidedly indicative of good taste, and his movements, like his conversation, were easy and graceful.

"I am afraid, Mr. Wilde, that by this time you must look upon all newspaper men as a great nuisance," said our reporter, apologetically.

"Not at all," was the hearty response, "I am very pleased to see you."

"We have heard so much lately of aestheticism, have seen it so abundantly caricatured, and really understand so little about it that I am glad to have an opportunity of conversing with you on the subject."

"There is nothing I like talking about better."

"Do you think the aesthetic movement in England has arisen from a genuine appreciation of the principles you teach, or is the general adoption of aesthetic

principles in decoration and dress a fashion in itself, one fashion being simply superseded by another?"

"It is not a fashion at all; it is a return to the right principles of art. This movement has entirely altered the whole character of ordinary English decorations. It would be impossible for anyone now to furnish a house without reference to our principles of design and decoration. Not merely are the ordinary houses of London so embellished, but when the Government wanted to decorate St. James' Palace last year, they at once gave the work to Mr. William Morris, one of the leaders of aestheticism."

"You think, then, that this very general adoption of aesthetic principles has arisen entirely from a genuine appreciation?"

"I don't think anyone adopts beauty out of consideration for fashion. If a thing is beautiful, one cannot help liking it. People will adopt the bizarre for the sake of fashion, but not the beautiful. Even if they did, they would come to see it was beautiful after being with it for a time."

"May I ask, what is your conception of beauty?"

"In the last century, people were fond of finding an abstract definition of beauty. I am quite content to put that off for my old age, if lovers of art have an old age."

"Do they die young then?"

"No! But art is always youthful. I am quite content if I am able to surround myself and others with beautiful things. That is the difference between our aesthetics of this century, and those of the last century. The German philosophers of the last century were content to live in the midst of the most dreadful surroundings, provided they could call beauty long names. We want to produce beautiful things, which is very much more practical. It so happens that within the last two years fashion has been with us, and as you suggested just now, many people may have adopted our principles for fashion's sake, but those principles will never leave them. They educate the taste in color, for instance."

"Are English tastes improving?"

"In music, the taste of the English people has enormously improved. Ten years ago the fashion happened to be for German music and consequently for good music. Now all the works of Beethoven and the other great masters are loved and appreciated. When you can bend fashion to the service of anything good or beautiful, it is of immense importance."

"What do you consider the principal element of beauty in music, is it in association?"

"The charm of all art is founded entirely upon the senses. One of the uses of art is to cultivate the senses. The ears of people who do not often hear good music become very coarse. They have not cultivated the sense of hearing, a sense capable of infinite refinement. One of the great faults of all the education of children is the trying to educate the mind, when probably they haven't got one, instead of trying to educate the senses, which everybody has. We all have eyes, ears and hands, but most people never use either eyes, ears or hands. Any right theory of education, it seems to me (and by the way I want to write upon that subject) must be founded on a principle of educating the mind, not directly, but through the means of the senses. What Universities have you here, and what are they like? I take great interest in Universities everywhere."

Our representative having briefly explained a few of the characteristics of the Canadian Universities, and the educational system generally, evoked several expressions of approval from Mr. Wilde. "Yes," said he, "it is better for the country to have a good general standard of education than to have, as we have in England, a few desperately over-educated and the remainder ignorant. One of the things which delighted me most in America was that the Universities reached a class that we, in Oxford, have never been able to touch, the sons of the farmers and people of moderate means. These are the people to whose wants the University should adapt its curriculum and expenses so that it should be able to reach them."

"Is not Gower Street (i.e. London University) a move in that direction?"

"Yes, Gower Street and Owens College, Manchester, are a move in that direction. Really half of any good that comes from university life comes from the indirect influences from fitting the boy to live by himself; it teaches him independence of mind and common sense, too."

"But under our system it is possible for a young man to earn his living, while obtaining his education."

"I do not think any University which does not require residence on the part of the undergraduates is anything more than a good day school."

Mr. Wilde very much dislikes our bare walls, and called our reporter's attention to the white breakfast service, with the nearest approach to disgust he had yet exhibited.

"Do you recognize any primitive and intrinsic beauty in color?" asked our representative.

"Color! It is the greatest enjoyment of my life, from the rising of the sun till the setting."

And this was the first and last time in the interview that he became enthusiastic or “intense.” His conversation was earnest, but practical and sensible. The arrival of a second visitor, many more being in the background, terminated a most agreeable interview.